

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and Dutch Humanism

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1992

It was quite exciting to be at the Amsterdam RAI Conference Center in July, 1992. Leaders of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and its nearly 80 member organisations from 35 countries were gathered in Amsterdam for the grand celebrations of the 40th anniversary Congress of IHEU. This World Humanist Congress brought together the different strands of Humanism that join to give International Humanism its special flavour: the intellectual, the philosophical and the freethought aspects of Humanism on the one side interacted with the practical social work and human rights oriented activities of Humanism.

The implicit Humanists and the explicit Humanists, the practical Humanists and the intellectual Humanists, the academic Humanists, the freethinking Humanists and the religious Humanists were all there, gathered under one roof in Amsterdam. The pluriform Humanism that was on display gave all of us a chance to expand our vision and conception of what Humanism was all about, and to learn what Humanism meant to different people. Personally, during those few busy days I learnt a lot about the scope and breadth of the Humanist movement worldwide.

Most rewardingly, apart from the many personal friendships we forged with each other and with the welcoming hosts, the Congress was also an opportunity for us to learn about the organised Humanist movement in the Netherlands which in many ways reflected in itself all the variety and vitality of Humanism around the world. Indeed, the Congress theme *Humanism for the Head and the Heart*, captured for me and for many others the essence of Dutch Humanism.

It was impressive to see that Dutch Humanism was at a peak, exuding great confidence and pride in its achievements and perspectives. What a revelation it was, to learn that a majority of the people in the Netherlands did not need a religion

to lead their lives. We were excited to learn that Humanists in the Netherlands had regular time allocated to them on television and that the state funded many of the activities of the Humanist organisations. To have a Humanist archive, to run a Humanist university, to have a specialist Humanist Human Rights organisation as well as a Humanist Broadcasting Corporation; to have Humanist counselling services in prisons and in hospitals – to have thousands of volunteers offering vital social service through Humanitas – all this was indeed unique. We learnt also about the past – about Multatuli and his great service during the colonial era, and about the most famous Dutch Humanist Erasmus.

It appeared to us that many of the things the Dutch Humanists were doing were at the cutting edge: Pieter Admiraal who was honoured for his role as a pioneer in extending euthanasia rights to dying patients brought the whole hall to tears, and to a standing ovation, when he movingly narrated his experience of performing euthanasia on his own father. The presence of several Humanist gay and lesbian rights activists, the defence of the rights of prostitutes by Dutch Humanists revealed another aspect of the Dutch Humanist engagement with self-determination, sexual autonomy and a liberal, modern attitude to social issues. We also witnessed interesting debates about post modernism and Humanism when we attended a Conference at the Humanist University in Utrecht.

While my vote has always been, and still is, for the naturalistic conception of the universe and for the modernist project, it was interesting to see some of the Dutch academicians unsuccessfully attempting to reconcile their postmodern positions with Humanism. But in Utrecht I was horrified to hear rumours that some Humanist counsellors in the Dutch hospitals did not subscribe to rationalism, and that they in fact believed in the paranormal – this in later years I understood as a problem that accompanies professionalisation of a movement based on ideas. I am sure that the leadership is seized of this important issue.

In any case, even if most of us visitors did not succeed in pronouncing *levensbeschouwing* despite trying for several days – after the exciting

days in Amsterdam and in Utrecht, we returned to our respective countries feeling good and proud about the achievements of our counterparts in the country and feeling inspired by a Humanist life stance which was strong enough to be part of the system, and a movement which offered moral direction to society, promoted both internal and external debate, defended Human freedoms and provided Humanist services to those that needed them.

1952 - 2002

In 2002, several years after IHEU moved its headquarters office from Utrecht to London, it was to Amsterdam that IHEU and its member organisations returned to celebrate 50 years of IHEU and the 50th anniversary Congress was on the theme *All Different, All Equal*. It was of course natural for IHEU and its member organisations to have returned to the Netherlands, for the Netherlands is the mother country of modern organised International Humanism, and it was here that the fledgling IHEU founded in 1952 was nurtured and guided by International Humanist leaders. It was with a base in the Netherlands that the IHEU grew from its original 8 founding member organisations to the present 100 member organisations from over 40 countries. Today, apart from the Humanistisch Verbond which is a founding member organisation of IHEU and on the strength of whose support the IHEU functioned in the Netherlands, a majority of IHEU's Specialist organisations come from the Netherlands: HIVOS, Humanitas, Humanist Broadcasting Corporation, Humanist Archives, Human Media Services, University of Humanistics, HVO etc. Indeed the IHEU archives are based in the Netherlands, in the care of the Humanist Archives.

Today the IHEU has grown to be a truly international organisation in which several streams of Humanism continue to merge – all of them unique and special, enriching the final outcome that International Humanism is. Over the past years IHEU has sharpened its profile as a Humanist organisation engaged in traditional areas of Humanist concern – exposing the prob-

lems with fundamentalist religion, dispelling superstitions, promoting democracy – as well as in new areas of Human activity where a Humanist perspective is needed: be it the promotion of universal values in a globalising world or of a Humanist perspective of Human Development or in matters related to modern developments in bioethics. After several successful campaigns to defend the rights of Humanists like Taslima Nasrin and Srini Pattathanam, and obtaining the spectacular release from blasphemy death row of Dr. Younis Shaikh in Pakistan, the IHEU is today widely recognised as a dynamic, multilingual democratic organisation. The IHEU has emerged as the voice of International Humanism. I cannot imagine that this would have been possible without the strength and the cooperation of IHEU's Dutch Humanist member organisations. It is a relation that has endured despite a period of turbulence immediately after IHEU's move to London from Utrecht.

Looking Ahead

In a new phase of its organisational life, IHEU is now taking more steps to reach out to newer countries where Humanism could be offered as a viable alternative to traditional authoritarian structures – in francophone countries, in Africa as well as in South Asia. IHEU recently made an important decision to decentralise and to concentrate on developing Humanism and Humanist projects in South Asia and in Africa where Humanism is most needed. For a long time IHEU has been a western organisation, but with this decision the center of gravity of the organisation will shift towards the third world and this vital step will make our federation of Humanist, Rationalist, Ethical Culture, Atheist and Laique organisations truly international.

The implications for the nature and character of the Humanist movement when it comes into contact with the various target groups that it seeks to influence will be interesting. There has been a certain disquiet amongst international Humanist leaders that despite the tremendously important work Dutch Humanism does, its pro-

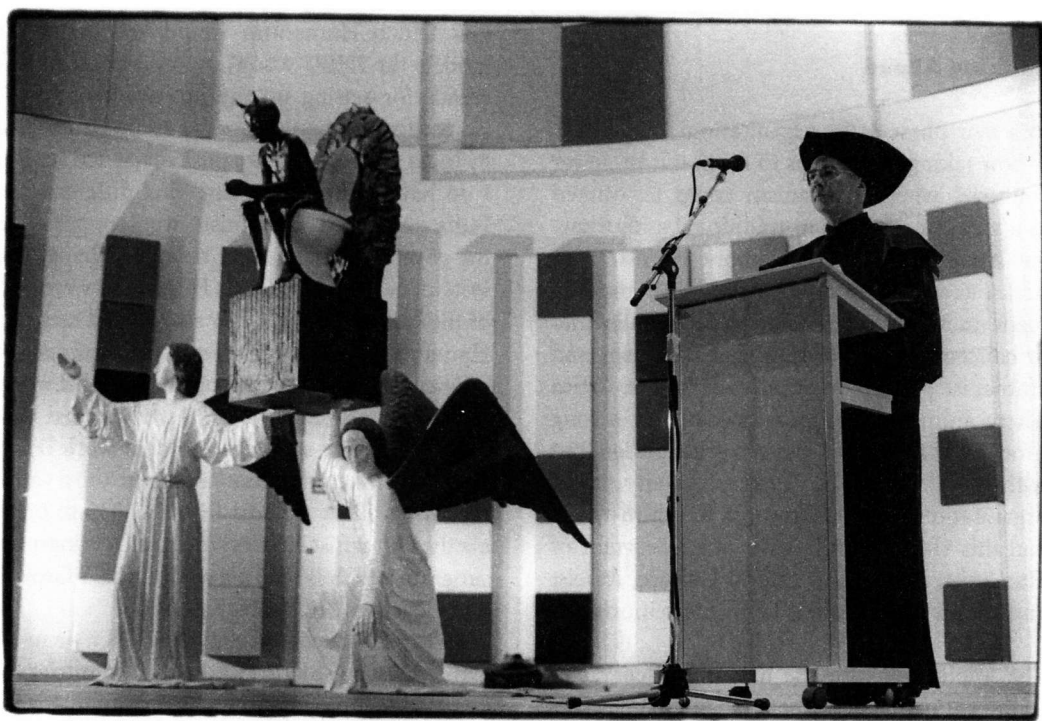
file has softened in the public eye (I could notice already in 1992 when Amsterdam local television did a snap poll in the streets at the time of the World Humanist Congress and not many who were stopped in the street and asked what Humanism meant had a clear idea) – it is to be seen whether International Humanism too will be similarly affected. My own attitude is that Humanism and the Humanist attitude must promote an inclusive approach, but while not being divisive in society, we must take care not to lose our distinct identity. Many times in the past I have heard Dutch humanist colleagues say that there was no more a need for a Humanist organisation in the Netherlands because the battle has been won. However, in the present circumstances in the Netherlands, it would be a very optimistic person who will make this claim. Humanists in the country need to, just as they did in the past, offer moral leadership to a nation caught in confused multiculturalism.

However, as IHEU expands, it is obvious to me that Dutch Humanism would be one of the models the IHEU would use as a point of reference for setting up the projects around the world: for Humanists in the Netherlands and in India pioneered Humanist social action. But I do have to point out one vital difference: in India organised Humanists were opposed to the government and were trying to change the system, in the Netherlands Humanists were part of the system, because they also helped create it. Humanists in the Netherlands visit hospitals to offer counselling services, but in the third world Humanists also have to build the required hospitals. To enable such development work IHEU and its member organisations in the third world receive excellent support from HIVOS to operate the Humanist Networking and Development program which is now a part of IHEU's Growth and Development strategy.

IHEU's recent decision that as a policy we move IHEU membership in third world countries towards development project orientation means IHEU and its member organisations will begin to create projects and raise funds to facilitate women's empowerment, support deprived communities such as the so-called untouchables in the Indian sub-continent and in Japan and will

also help in the relief and rehabilitation – on humanist lines – of victims of social and natural disasters. No doubt the International Humanist community will come back to the Netherlands for guidance on how to go about this task, for Dutch Humanists have been, in this field as in others, pioneers in social services and social development fields.

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